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Bustards returning

Until 1810, **great bustards** nested on the rolling downland of Salisbury Plain in Wiltshire, their last haunt in Britain.

The Birds of Wiltshire, written by The Revd. Alfred Smith in 1887, has this handsome bird on its cover (right) and a bustard still figures on the county's crest. The author devoted many pages to tell the story of the gradual extinction of this magnificent bird – and fascinating reading it makes too.

In Europe, while still present in Spain and Portugal for example, bustard numbers are declining as agricultural improvements degrade the open steppe lands where nomadic shepherds traditionally grazed their sheep.



book cover cc N Brown



Despite their size, great bustards are superbly camouflaged and are masters at drifting quietly away behind any small hillock big enough to conceal them. The best place in Spain to see this majestic bird in numbers (50+) is the steppe country round **Villafilla** close to the Portuguese border. It was here that I found one freshly dead in 2003. I removed some feathers which, as you can see, are extremely beautiful. In spring, the males perform a strange display, turning their feathers inside out to show off their white undersides (below). They look like giant **powder puffs**, standing out like sore thumbs across the steppe for all the neighbouring males (and females) to see.

bustard feathers cc N Brown

In Wiltshire, a [re-introduction scheme](#) has been running on **Salisbury Plain** since 1999 and this summer, the first chicks were reared. Some of the released adults have been taken by **foxes**, some have flown to France while others turn up regularly on the Somerset Levels in winter, keeping company with flocks of **mute swans** grazing in the fields.

As these reintroduction birds increase, it's possible that within a decade or so, some bustards will roam further afield...who knows, even north to steppe-less **Derbyshire**.....if so, where might they turn up?

The smart money is on the Trent Valley, among the wintering flocks of swans.....



Male powder puff display © Jonas Olah/Sakertours



Delights of winter!

As trees lose their leaves, so their beautiful form and structure are once more revealed – one real benefit of winter!

Many are identifiable by the way they branch. This hedgerow pair were photographed at dusk near **Meynell Langley**. Can you identify the strange, scruffy-looking tree on the right?

Clue: its name includes that of a marine creature which has two more legs than a harvestman!

cc N Brown

Churchyard vets

Some of the county's oldest trees are to be found in churchyards. For example, there are huge **yew trees** at **Mugginton** and **Doveridge** churchyards though neither are



quite as capacious as this giant (right) at **Much Marcle** in Herefordshire. In its hollow centre you can seat a family of six!

The dead stump of a veteran yew tree (left) in the churchyard at

Duffield has been overwhelmed by **ivy** to such an extent that it looks like a living tree all over again. But don't be fooled – the vet is 'well dead' - it's just wearing a rather stylish wig!



Both photos cc Nick Brown

Gardens fall silent

"The birds in my garden have disappeared – what's the reason please?" I often get enquiries like that. The cause is usually a sparrowhawk – and indeed, a smart male has been raiding my own feeders several times each day. Feathers of **goldfinches** and a **blackbird** nearby testify to the hawk's success - little wonder the birds now skulk in the bushes!

After a while, the predator's success rate drops off and it hunts elsewhere. The birds come back and things return to normal. At least that's the theory...though our garden has been raided daily for over a month now! The only upside is that you save money on bird food.....speaking of which:

Text by Nick Brown (nbrown@derbyshirewt.co.uk). Published by Derbyshire Wildlife Trust, East Mill, Bridge Foot, Belper, DE56 1XH. Tel 01773 881188. Reg. Charity 222212. E: enquiries@derbyshirewt.co.uk . W: www.derbyshirewildlifetrust.org.uk